

# CHRISTIAN MESSENGER.

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VOL. I.

A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another, as I have loved you—JOHN xiii. 34.

## ON THE EXTERNAL EVIDENCES OF THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION.

### CHAPTER III.

Continued from page 190.

THE testimony of the younger Pliny, though later (about eighty years after Christ's death,) is very material: it proves that the Christians were exposed to the severest sufferings, without any public persecution being denounced against them by sovereign authority: he requests the Emperor's instructions how he is to act: yet it appears that accusations, trials, and executions, were and had been going on long against them: and we may fairly argue, that if such was their treatment from a polished scholar,\* and from a mild and equitable prince, their general situation must have been singularly hard and distressful. From a rescript of Adrian to Minucius Fundanus, the pro-consul of Asia, it appears, that it was the custom of the people of Asia to proceed against the Christians with tumult and clamor.† Martial seems to have in view the sufferings of the Christians in one of his epigrams,‡ and to make them the subject of his ridicule,—which, if it be the case, shews the notoriety of the fact,—and his testimony as well as Pliny's goes also to another point; namely, that their sufferings and deaths were so far voluntary, that they might have prevented them by consenting to join in the heathen sacrifices. The constancy, (which implies sufferings) of the Christians is imputed by Epictetus§ to madness, or habit, and is very unphilosophically deducted, by Marcus

Aurelius,\* from obstinacy of disposition.

The last source of the mass of evidence upon which the sufferings of the original teachers of christianity so established, are the writings of the Christians themselves.

In the first place, our four Gospels agree in representing Christ as foretelling the persecution of his followers,†—and though we are not entitled to argue from these passages that Christ did actually foretel these events, and that they accordingly came to pass, for that would be to assume the truth of the religion, yet we may confidently contend that either this was really the case, or that the writers of these histories put the predictions in Christ's mouth, because at the time of writing them the event had turned out in this manner. The fact is indisputable, (as will be presently seen,) that these writers were among the first race of Christians, and that their writings were known and public in the age immediately succeeding to that of the apostles. Whoever, therefore, were their authors, they bear testimony to the sufferings of the first teachers of Christianity.

Secondly, the collection of letters which have come down to us, written in the midst of the business of the first promulgation of the gospel, without the slightest design to give posterity any history of it, abounds every where with exhortations to patience and topics of comfort under distress, and with direct though incidental allusions to the sufferings of the first-teachers.‡ What could these mean, if there was nothing in the circumstances of the times which required the exercise of constancy and resolution,—or is it credible that these writers should universally speak of their sufferings and distresses, in an

age which witnessed their life and actions, unless there was truth in the assertions? That the letters mentioning these sufferings of the first Christians appeared in the age, I have before established, and that these sufferings were voluntarily sustained for the sake of establishing the truth of their religion is apparent from the ascendant testimonies of Christian and Pagan writers. Tacitus, Pliny, Marcus Antonius,\* and other heathen writers speak of their obstinate endurance of punishment solely on this account. The letters of the apostles before mentioned, assign solely this reason for their labours and patience. The writings of their contemporaries bear unequivocal testimony to this point,† and Tertullian, at the end of the second century, could confidently assert, that scarcely one christian had suffered public punishment for any crime but his religion.‡

I am therefore warranted in concluding, that the original preachers of Christianity voluntarily underwent labours, dangers and sufferings, solely for the purpose of establishing the truth of a story, which story was miraculous, and, in the main, the same with that which is believed by modern Christians.

To be continued.

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FOR THE CHRISTIAN MESSENGER.

Remarks on "*To A friend to Truth and Consistency.*"

To \* \* \*.

SIR,—As a friend to truth, especially to that which is connected with any important subjects of religion, I again

\* Marc. Ant. lib. ii. c. 3.

† Among these, the words of Ignatius are too remarkable to be omitted. "For this cause," (i. e. for having felt and handled Christ's body after his resurrection, and being convinced, as he expresses it, by his flesh and spirit,) "they" (Peter, and those who were present with them at Christ's appearance,) "despised death, and were found to be above it." Epist. Smyrna, c. iii.

‡ Tertullian's apol. c. 44.

\* Marc. Aurel. Mid. lib. xi. c. 3.

† Matt. xxiv. 9. Mark iv. 17. Luke xxi. 12—16. John xvi. 4.

‡ Rom. v. 3, 4. viii. 35, 37. 2 Cor. iv. 8, 9, 10, 14, 15, 17. James v. 10, 11. Heb. x. 32, 36. 2 Thess. i. 1—5. Pet. 12, 13, 19.

\* The judgment of Pliny is still upon record. "Those who persisted in declaring themselves Christians, I ordered to be led away, (i. e. to execution:) for I did not doubt whatever it was they professed, that contumacy and inflexible obstinacy ought to be punished." Epis. ad Trajanum.

† Lard. Heath. Test. vol. ii, page 110.

‡ Epig. lib. x. 25.

§ Epict. lib. iv. c. 7.



take the liberty of addressing you. The points of difference still existing between us, I apprehend may be easily understood, and the one who is correct respecting them (if either of us are so,) as easily known.

You say it was your design to establish the following proposition, "That the mysteriousness of a doctrine is no proof of its falsity," but had you merely attempted this, it would not have been "differing" from me, as I have never said that the mysteriousness of a doctrine is a "proof of its falsity," but have only stated it as a *reason* for not believing it, see No. 41, page 162, No. 44, page 174, last sentence; but you have stated expressly "that the mysteriousness of a doctrine is not an *objection* to our receiving it as true," No. 43, page 169. This then is the point on which we are at issue, but here I do not pretend to say that a mystery expresses something that is necessarily absurd, or impossible ever to be comprehended, but only that it is a something at present not understood. And it is not deserving credit or belief until it is comprehended and even shewn to be true. If there are any "mysteries (or things entirely unknown,) which are connected with religion," and "which we ought to believe." I should be glad to see them pointed out; religion, I take to be the will of the Deity revealed to mankind for their obedience, but how can a thing unknown be the revealed will of God, or how can we ascertain that it is a *truth* connected with his revealed will and which we ought to believe, or how can we act in conformity to a proposition or a mystery that we do not comprehend. Allow for the sake of illustration, that a mechanical business is (as I consider it to be) a-mystery to all who have not learned it, can any such person believe *how* the work in that business is done, or can he perform such work till he has acquired an understanding of it, surely it is obvious he cannot, but when he does understand it, he is enabled to *believe how* it is done. And can also follow the occupation. If then there are mysteries connected with religion they must be explained, they must be understood before they can be believed or applied to our service, and until this is done it is at least an "*objection*" to our receiving the mystery

as a truth and when so done the objection of course can no longer exist.

Though ever willing and desirous of being convinced of any mistake, and also conceiving it to be more honourable to acknowledge an error than to persist in one, I must at present say, that what I treated as a contradiction in your piece still appears in that point of view; the intention of your additional "explanation" is precisely in point of argument, the same as your previous illustration. You have said "that no doctrine of Christianity can be fully comprehended, but that we may perfectly understand any doctrine as simply stated to be such." The question immediately occurs, if we *perfectly* understand a doctrine do we not *consequently* FULLY understand it, or is it possible that we can perfectly understand a doctrine, and yet not have a *full* understanding of it, if so, I beg to ask what constitutes a perfect understanding of a doctrine, or whether any thing short of a full understanding of a doctrine, will render us perfect in it. But to obviate any misconception, you will observe that I have said I do not believe that Jesus was more than a man because such an idea is involved in a mystery. It is admitted that the idea is not false nor absurd because it is a mystery, but it is one of my reasons for not believing in it, in a similar manner as I cannot believe *how* mechanical work is done until I understand *how* it is done. But as to the doctrine of the Trinity as stated in your article, this is not rejected by me as is the notion of Jesus being more than a man, merely because I do not understand it to be true, but because it is a proposition that contradicts itself, and as such is manifestly absurd and false; its advocates have given it the name of mystery, but without authority for so doing. I really wish it deserved no worse name, but a mystery is a something we do not at present comprehend, but which may nevertheless be true, but to say that there are *three* Gods and yet but *one*, is a plain contradiction, and of course a *positive* falsehood. It follows therefore, that if the Trinity were so stated in the Scriptures there would be no mystery in it—nothing to form a part of the doctrine we could not comprehend. But with respect to miracles, if they are contrary to the laws of nature as you

have asserted them to be, it is a point you ought to establish before you had drawn any conclusion therefrom, and in attempting this it is absolutely necessary to observe that certain effects invariably produced by the experiments *we* make will not prove that the effects produced by Deity are opposed to his laws, as this will depend, as before stated, on what *all his unknown* laws are. I therefore conceive, that till we are better informed respecting such laws instead of saying that miracles are "contrary" to them it would be more consistent to say that miracles are different from or superior to the regular course of events or in other words they are not of common occurrence and can only be performed by Deity or by peculiar power derived from him.

But the possibility of miracles being accordant to some unknown law of nature and the means by which they are performed, being incomprehensible, you say is considered as a ground of argument that the doctrine of the Trinity may possibly be true, but Sir, this is as much as saying that any nonsense may be just—any contradiction may be true because God can make any thing just and true, such logic may suit Trinitarians, but it will not agree with common sense. According to your quotation, the Trinitarian says "That *three* beings should be one being, is a proposition which certainly contradicts reason, but it does not from thence follow that it cannot be true." Is it possible, Sir, that you do not believe in the doctrine of the Trinity, and yet feel satisfied with such an observation. Is not reason a proper judge of this matter; what says Jesus, "Why even of yourselves judge ye not what is right?" which is the same as saying, and why do you not exercise your reasoning powers and thereby decide what is right, at present then I think I cannot do better than to leave with all due respect Trinitarians and yourself Sir, to settle this point with our Master. But your quotation is continued in the following manner, "There are many propositions which contradict our reason and yet are demonstrably true. One is the very first principle of all religion, the being of a God, for that any being should exist without a cause, or that any thing should be the cause of its own existence are propositions equally contradictory to our reason, yet one of

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them must be true, or nothing could ever have existed." That any thing should exist without a cause it certainly contrary to our reason; but that God is a cause un-caused by any thing separate and distinct from himself or in other terms that he self-existed is not contrary to our reason, for our reason leads us to discover that he must have existed *somehow of himself*, for by tracing back causes, we must ultimately come to a first cause, but *how* he self-existed we do not know, this is a mystery, but his self-existence is not necessarily false, because, the manner in which it took place is incomprehensible to our limited capacities, but it is strictly within the bounds of probability because we cannot account for the existence of the various effects we see, without allowing of a first, or self-existing cause. It is then mere assertion without proof "that there are many propositions which contradict our reason, and yet are demonstrably true." But again, your further quotation says, "We know that no two beings with whose mode of existence we are acquainted can exist at the same time in the same point of space, and that therefore they cannot be one, but how far beings whose mode of existence bears no relation to time or space may be united, we cannot comprehend; therefore, the possibility of such a union cannot be denied." I perceive by this, Sir, that Trinitarians can reason upon subjects when it suits their purpose to do so, and I presume it is only when reason does not agree with their creed that they lay it aside, the above quotation is not objectionable in itself, but possibly it is intended to lead to a false conclusion, viz. that because the "union" alluded to "cannot be denied," there may be no impropriety in yielding credence to it as a fact, but our not being able to deny a thing is no reason for believing in it, and if the notion is contrary to Scripture this is sufficient to justify our disbelief therein. But you observed "that upon my principle of reasoning the doctrine of the Trinity may be supported, for a belief in the simple fact of the resurrection is what we are bound to believe, and nothing further—so say the advocates of the Trinity. Christ we are taught by the Scriptures to be a divine person in human form, and one of the persons constituting the Godhead, this is all

we are called upon to believe." Alas! Indeed Sir, this is calling upon us to believe a great deal too much. The resurrection of the dead is a fact of which we possess evidence, and a belief in it follows as a consequence of such evidence, but the idea that the Scriptures teach that Jesus is a divine person or a part of the Godhead, is false, and therefore unworthy of belief.

But, Sir, your concluding observation is not less exceptionable, "no doctrine," as you state, "is to be rejected however mysterious or repellent to human reason, provided it is clearly taught in the Scriptures, and if we have incontestible proof of the authenticity of that Scripture." The question arising from this statement is, can we have incontestible proof of the authenticity of any portion of Scripture which inculcates a doctrine that is not only mysterious but repellent to human reason? Suppose that the Scriptures said that Jonah swallowed a whale? Is it possible that the authenticity of a circumstance so much opposed to our reason could be proved or rendered credible? I trust Sir, that a little further examination of this point will convince you that for any thing in the Scriptures as well as elsewhere to be worthy of belief it must in the first place be possible,\* and under all the circumstances of the case more probable than otherwise.

Yours, &c.

A FRIEND TO TRUTH AND CONSISTENCY.

### Christian Messenger.

Philadelphia, Monday, July 10, 1820.

FOR THE CHRISTIAN MESSENGER.

MR. EDITOR,

IN reading the piece signed "LECTOR," in the last Messenger, I was surprised to see it pass without a single remark. The writer, whose motive may be very good, seems to be not sufficiently acquainted with his subject; and is either too inexplicit, or else

\* Surely *human reason* must judge of the possibility, and why not of the probability of every circumstance. And if it ought not to be exercised in either case, I deem it not improper to ask, why has God given us this faculty? or why (according to the Scriptures,) did he call upon his people to use it? or why did his appointed teachers, in all cases, appeal to it.

wanting in propriety. Mere verbosity, replete with random incoherent assertions, so far from convincing of error, only serves to disgust. Whether this is the character of Lector, we will leave the reader to judge, after selecting a few sentences which we mean to make the subject of remark. It is the misfortune of polemic writings, that in them, error will sometimes be ably defended, and at others, truth itself may fall into very weak or injudicious hands. While therefore, we find it necessary to object to the writings of "LECTOR," let it be understood, at the same time, that we consider many of his statements correct and true.

Speaking of the "vestiges of man's tradition," Lector says, "One of these vestiges is the baptism of infants, a ceremony no where authorised in Scripture, and which has given rise to persecution." If Lector means to assert that *baptism* is no where authorised in Scripture, it is an assertion which deserves not a serious reply; and before he excludes infants from the rite, he should be able to shew that there were no infants in the household of Lydia, (Acts xxi. 14.) of the jailer, (verse 33,) of Stephanus; (1 Cor. i. 16.) for if there were any children in those families, (a case very probable, to say the least,) they were undoubtedly baptized on the faith of the parents; and if so, their baptism was as much authorised as the baptism of those persons. We mean nothing more by this however, than to offer an argument by way of an excuse or apology for continuing the rite; that is, by those who wish to continue it. If baptism had been always kept free to all, and compulsory to none, it could never have "given rise to persecution;" persecution, therefore, must be imputed to some other cause, and not to the ceremony of baptism. The ridiculous and superstitious notions relative to baptism spoken of by Lector, as they do not apply at all to us, we shall leave without remark.

L. says "The mode of infant baptism varies;"—if he alludes to former times, when they were sometimes baptized by immersion, and sometimes by sprinkling, or the pouring on of water, he is probably correct; but if he alludes to present times, we know of no material difference. But L. continues, "Sometimes no water is used, it is



then termed dedication." Here L. labours under a great mistake, and has confounded things which were designed to have been kept distinct. The dedication of infants or other children to God, to whom they properly belong, is not called baptism, nor considered as such; neither is it considered a sacred ordinance instituted by Christ, and binding on all his followers, but only a public expression and acknowledgement of the faith of the parents; believing, as it is presumed, only in that baptism which L. says "is essential to salvation;" and while it is kept perfectly free to all, and compulsory to none, we see no reason why its performance should give offence. L. proceeds—"and preachers are so anxious to perform the rite," &c. Was L. aware that he was pronouncing a very unjust aspersion on all preachers except Universalists? For we know of no other preachers who are in the habit of dedicating children. L. therefore will see the impropriety of charging any thing upon the whole order of preachers which is practised by one denomination only. And if L. was as anxious to promote harmony, (instead of discord,) among brethren, as he says the preachers are to perform this rite, why cannot he, (in a thing so perfectly innocent and harmless,) be as ready "to bend to the prejudice or whim of" these preachers, as he says they are "to bend to the prejudice or whim of parents."

L. is equally unfortunate in his conclusion that "the Friends and those who believe with them in this respect," are alluded to in the address generally given previous to dedication: so far from this I do not believe that they are ever so much as once thought of on these occasions; but, if any personal allusion is meant, it is designed for those, and those only, who deny that all infants are heirs of the kingdom of heaven. Neither does the memory of L. serve him very well when he says "we are told, 'That our blessed Redeemer was approached by some children,' " &c. We are told that there were those who brought their little children to Christ, &c. but we have no account that he was approached by them, which seems to imply that they came of their own accord. But let this matter be as it may, it was the *disciples* who made the objection at that time, and therefore,

whoever is supposed to be alluded to, they cannot be supposed to possess a worse disposition than the disciples possessed at that time. For myself, I suppose that no one is alluded to, but only the simple fact stated, which took place at the time when little children were brought to Jesus. "That, in the eye of the Supreme Ruler, those who walk uprightly are received without respect to (persons or to) ordinances," we most cordially admit and believe; but then as Jesus was disposed to receive little children and to bless them, while he was here on earth, we cannot suppose it will be disagreeable to him, if, in imitation of his example, his ministers should do the same.

After speaking thus, by way of disapprobation of dedication, L. returns again to "water baptism," and introduces it by the word "indeed!" as though he was still speaking of the same subject. "Indeed, water baptism, which receives no sanction from revelation and is repugnant to reason," &c. What! Did not John baptize with water, was not Jesus, Cornelius, and the Eunuch baptized by water, and have we any account that either John or the disciples of Jesus baptized in any other mode? How then does L. say that water baptism "receives no sanction from revelation?" He will not undertake to say that either John, or the disciples of Jesus, baptized without proper authority. It is possible that L. might mean something which he thought he could support, but unless a man's words express his meaning, how shall we know what is meant? I suppose he meant water baptism of *infants*; for he says soon after, "that of adults savours much of this." L. says, that Jesus "never baptized any one in this mode." Now, what is the difference, whether Jesus baptized himself, or whether the disciples baptized in his name and by his authority? "Jesus made and baptized more disciples than John, (though Jesus himself baptized not, but his disciples;)" See John iv. 1, 2; yet for ought we know to the contrary, Jesus baptized the twelve; for the above text alludes to other disciples which Jesus made and baptized, and not to the twelve. L. says the conditions of Jesus were not, "Be ye immersed;" why then did his disciples immerse? i. e. why did they baptize? This, how-

ever, was not done to the exclusion of the other condition named by L.

"But did he not say, 'Go teach all nations baptizing, &c.' yes, but (L. says) not with water baptism," &c. Now, how does he know this? Does the reason which he gives prove it? Certainly not; for this commission might have been given to the disciples and not to Paul who says, he was not sent to baptize, but to preach the gospel, 1 Cor. i. 17. This therefore, would prove as much against any kind of baptism as that of water. But the disciples were sent to disciple all nations baptizing them, &c. Now is it likely, that they were to baptize differently from what they had done when Jesus was with them, and when Jesus made and baptized more disciples than John? And is it likely that at that time the disciples of Jesus baptized otherwise than John? I think not.

L. would have got along much better if he had admitted that water baptism was authorised and sanctioned by Christ; and then have argued that it was his design that it should have ceased with his disciples; and as a proof of this, he might have adduced St. Paul, who was not sent to baptize, but simply to preach the gospel.

After all, L. can be the best judge for himself, whether he is wrong in rejecting water baptism, since, in a religious sense, all that it can do is the answering of a good conscience towards God; see 1 Pet. iii. 21. if his conscience, therefore, is fully answered towards God, in rejecting it, we certainly should not advise him to submit to it merely for the sake of being "*fashionable*!"

CANDOUR.

We did not, it is true, think proper to make any remarks on the last communication of Lector; for considering ourselves personally alluded to therein, it might have been thought we were prejudiced; and now, we have no occasion to add any thing at present, but should any thing be written in reply, we may take the subject up hereafter.

ED.

PRINTING

Neatly executed at this Office.